

OAKLAND

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400 turn out for neighborhood crime meeting *PARK*

Fear heightened by the recent killing of a woman during a street robbery near Oakland's Rose Garden prompted 400 residents to turn out last night for a meeting on increasing crime in the city's usually quiet northeast neighborhoods.

Police Chief George Hart answered questions from worried residents about drug dealing in the Rose Garden, panhandling on Piedmont Avenue, increasing residential burglaries and car break-ins.

Hart told them that crime prevention by the police department was severely hampered by city budget problems, and encouraged residents to join neighborhood watch groups.

"I will not tell you that we are not doing the job we would like to do," he said. In the last city budget crunch, Hart was obligated to cut 104 police officers at a time when he was asking for 125 additional officers.

The meeting at Plymouth Church on Monte Vista Avenue was organized by Oakland City Council member Mary Moore, whose district includes the neighborhoods of Temescal, Trestle Glen, China Hill, Adams Point, Piedmont Avenue, parts of Dimond, and the Grand Lake district. Another meeting is scheduled for April 23.

City Manager Henry Gardner was invited to the meeting, but did not attend.

Contacted last night at his home, Gardner said that Moore knew he would not be attending the meeting, but he declined to elaborate on the reasons for his absence.

Hart suggested that anyone interested in information about home protection call 238-3066.

Urban Beauty, URBAN BLIGHT

Crime is a thorn
in Oakland Rose Garden's side

SAT MAY 23 1992

By Brenda Lane Richardson/Tribune staff writer

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for 19 years. She visits the park almost daily. She thinks things began to deteriorate about two years ago, when teen-age drug dealers and prostitutes began seeking refuge there.

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Joanne Hausler, president of the Rose Garden Neighborhood Preservation Association, said that since that time, steps were taken to make the park safer. "Most of the underbrush was cleared away and police on foot patrols can now see clear through from the streets, down through the garden."

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But the daytime beauty and serenity of this park bespeak a calm that is shattered at sundown when teenage vandals come calling.

The problems the park faces present a textbook case in the growing national debate over who has a right to use public recreational facilities, representing conflicts in urban parks throughout the country.

“I wouldn’t go too far in there,” said 68-year-old Teddy Roby, pointing into the Rose Garden one afternoon last month. She tapped her watch in explanation. “Daytimes, anytime before 5 o’clock is safe, even mothers bring their babies then. After 5, things get kind of rough.”

Unfortunately for Roby, she didn’t follow her own advice. Two weeks after issuing this warning to a young couple, she found herself threatened by a gang of teenage thugs. “It was my fault,” she later acknowledged. “I knew it was quarter



The garden shows Promise, however — a beautiful variety.

after 5, but I went in anyway.”

Roby said she broke her rule because “I saw a gang of boys holding a kitten up over a pond and I just couldn’t stand the thought of them drowning this cat.” She said she approached the boys, and they surrounded her, mocked her. “I was pretty scared, but I didn’t let them know that.”

Fortunately for her, a nearby resident alerted the police, who arrived before she was harmed.

Richard Wirkkal, supervising ranger for Oakland Parks, was not surprised that Roby was res-

cued thanks to watchful neighbors. “We patrol that area regularly,” he said. But since a full-time police guard is financially impossible, as well as “unwarranted there,” the police often depend on nearby residents. “The sounds really carry down there,” Wirkkal said, “and if anything goes on down there we usually hear about it.”

Sometimes they hear about problems after the fact, according to Roby, who has lived three blocks from the Rose Garden — with its main entrance on Jean Street, just off Grand Avenue —

for 19 years. She visits the park almost daily. She thinks things began to deteriorate about two years ago, when teen-age drug dealers and prostitutes began seeking refuge there.

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“It’s a lot safer than it used to be,” she added.

David Skinner, head rosarian at the park, would agree. He said he has never witnessed illegal activity amid seven acres of beautifully blooming roses, but he has reason to believe some of Roby’s claims.

The garden has been the stage for everything from harmless pranks to murder.

Two years ago, the body of a suspected prostitute was found in the upper terrace; used condoms sometimes litter the grounds; the body parts of tortured cats have been found in bushes; rose buds have been whacked off; public toilets have been plugged with garbage. Earlier this year, Skinner arrived at work to find “toilet paper in long streamers all along the back section of bushes. It was a couple of acres.”

Despite this, Skinner believes that things have since gotten better. He shrugs off the idea of the garden being a dangerous place.

“Sure,” he said, “I report it to

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the police, but it's unfair to expect them to do something about this. There's too much going on out there in the city for them to make us a priority."

Skinner's boss, Arthur Yamashita, senior maintenance supervisor for Oakland's parks, sums up the nature of the conflict:

"How do you keep one group out and allow access to others? You can't. It's not illegal for people to loiter in parks. That's what they're for. We happen to be helpless at controlling what people are doing while they're sitting in parks."

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Such conflicts are not confined to Oakland. Tour most big city parks and the graffiti and

broken bottles show who's winning. Many urban experts agree that these problems are a ramification of the social breakdown in general.

"We've heard these complaints from around the country. Kids just look for something easy to destroy. Most gardens don't have the money to pay for security," said Grace Maubach, administrative assistant for All America Rose Selections Inc., a Chicago-based group representing 134 municipal rose gardens.

Police, Maubach added, have their hands full already and "parks are one of their least concerns."

In Oakland, according to Park Services Manager Tony Acosta, the Rose Garden has a relatively low rate of vandalism, compared with other parks, such as the San Antonio, near Foothill and 16th Street, where he said

the tool room was recently broken into and most items were either destroyed or stolen.

"We have curfews in our parks," he added, "and most law-abiding citizens tend to observe those curfews." The Rose Garden, like many of the city's parks, closes at dusk and is patrolled occasionally by the police.

Allan Jacobs, who teaches city planning at the University of California at Berkeley, said that when limited public funds are available, the police must make serious crime a priority. But he stressed that "parks are critical places in cities, places where people can get away from it all. When studies are done on what people most care about in cities, especially in America, people say greenery."

In a city like Oakland, he concluded, "the parks help make it

wonderful. Oakland is known for its beautiful parks, such as Lake Merritt."

City administrators must agree. Next spring, thanks to the passage of Measures AA and K, \$675,000 will be spent on a major renovation of the Oakland Rose Garden. This will include improvements ranging from replacing the older roses and a new watering system to repaving the walks. There is also a chance, if money is left over, that a lighting system will be installed, which could help deter crime.

Sheilah Fish, a family counselor who is also an environmentalist, said that especially in a city concerned with rising crime rates, urban mental health is vital. "People need a place of calm, where they can experience the world through nature, the sight, sound and touch of it."